

ARGUING FOR A MEDIA LAW: THE RELEVANCE OF CABLE CHANNELS IN CREATION OF 'LOCAL' IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

I forward the idea of the existence of local cable channels, a distinct media which beams programmes in the local language, on topics that are relevant and belongs to the local area. The 'local' which has lost out in the mainstream media gains importance here, infact the local becomes the site for production of 'culture'. But the existence of such local cable channels which is popular almost all over the country exists by virtue of legal loopholes in the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act 1995. The importance of these channels broadcasted over a limited area cannot be discounted as I show with the help of two case studies in my paper. These channels act as essentially selling points for the networks, catering to customer requests and also programming which are uniquely local. These spawn a large number of such channels in every small or big town so much so that their exact numbers can hardly be predicted.

Thus, I argue the case for legalizing the role of local cable channels in creation of an alternate reality, a role which essentially the 'mainstream' has failed to deliver in the course of the last few decades. It is the space left vacant by National and regional media that is essentially covered by local cable channels and it becomes imperative to safeguard this very important democratic tool by proper legal framework.

KEYWORDS: Media, Local Cable Channels, Law, Cable & Network

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INTRODUCTION

Assam witnessed a boom in its media sector in 1990's with language newspapers leading the way. The decade before that the press in Assam had played an active role in the nationalist agitation that took place in Assam. This sudden explosion of the regional press played an important role in the creation of an informed public sphere. The media explosion of the 1990s, commonly going under the shorthand 'globalization', was not without a history, but was marked by a certain concentration of both media forms and temporal acceleration. Consider this: within a few years India saw satellite cable television growing from just a handful to a total of 80 channels, and the growth of other media in the form of cassettes, CDs, VCDs, MP3s, and DVDs. Media ownership was extremely diverse (Sundaram, 2005: 56).

In this paper I analyze the role of local cable channels (henceforth lcc's) in the context of Assam, and what makes the idea of a local press in a globalized world where ideas of culture are increasingly changing with shift in centers of production. For obvious reasons the idea of the local is often constructed on administrative or cartographic definitions of areas. "Lack of clear, shared definitions does not, however, prevent people from being attached to their region of residence" (Aldridge, 2007: 11). Whereas ideas such as multi-national, trans-national, nation states or international organizations are constructed as global ideas, the 'local' struggles for a definitive area.

Territoriality however, has often been considered an important consideration as Held *et al.* explains 'local' in communication terminology as "consolidation of flows and networks within a specific locale" (1999: 16). The importance of the 'local sphere' has been emphasized in such communication theories, to create opinion and views in matters that affect the local population. Dirlik has argued the local "as a site both of promise and predicament" (1996: 22). He says it "serves as a site for the working out of the most fundamental contradictions of the age" (*ibid* 1996: 23). Where the idea of the local can be empowering and emancipatory in its very ideals, there is a fear of parochialism and dictatorial tendencies taking over. Thus we see that the term 'local' has increasingly become de-territorialized concepts acting as the basic units for the production of everyday space.

MEDIA IN ASSAM

The boom in media has also seen a rise of the concentration of media in Guwahati. Language newspapers who published from other towns have felt themselves alienated from the nerve center Guwahati, so much so that some of them had to move out of the districts and set shop in the state capital of Guwahati. This undue interest in Guwahati has also led to news stories and programmes having a clear Guwahati centric bias and in the process the other parts of the state feel left out. The local cable channels took advantage of the already existing cable networks; their delivery mechanism was so strong that the satellite channels too had to take the help of these networks to reach the smaller centers. As a result local issues got a local agency to reach the people of the area. The process of localization of the press operates within a complex hierarchy of media-structures and media-territories. This making of the local press involves inventing new semiotic vocabularies and new narratives to define and celebrate the 'local', within a specific media space created in contrast with the already available global, national or mainstream media.

CASE STUDIES

In this section I analyse the functioning and growth of two such local cable channels (LCC) run by cable networks in Silchar and Dibrugarh in Assam. These channels would be the one stop destination for all kinds of local events that would be happening in the area. The area of collecting news therefore would remain the boundaries of the reach of the network. Therefore the existence of the channels would be symbiotic to the network itself. The local news bulletin was something innovative, and also earned extra revenue through local advertisements. "By insisting and sometimes even supplying footage of a local event, such as a cricket match, inauguration of a public amenity or a celebrity visit to the area, they (LCO) can have these items included in the evening news bulletin. This may be a way of getting personal publicity for himself or of rising in the estimation of the local boss; either way, it was a practice that the MSOs encouraged during the early days to cultivate local contacts and expand their networks" (Naregal, 2000: 304).

Barak Television Network (BTN)

BTN Cable is a major Multiple System Operator (MSO) for the Barak valley region of Assam. Situated at Silchar, the capital of Cachar district, BTN cable is located strategically in the commercial hub of the region. For practical purposes broadcasting from Silchar, the kind of money that is required to run a satellite channel, enough revenue won't be generated to be sustainable. Today it reaches almost 80% of the household of the Cachar district." For all purposes opening a satellite channel based in district towns is impractical. All the revenue comes from Guwahati and satellite channels in turn have to be dependent on cable distribution networks to reach the people across the state, which is costly.

Advertisements although a major issue for these local networks, are impeded by their smaller reach to get big clients. Small advertisements which include anything from coaching centers, swimming classes, birthday wishes, anniversary wishes, inaugurations, local events, astrologers, doctors etc. form the bulk of such advertisements. These advertisements are mostly in the form of banners on top and bottom of the screen, and also running tickers which are booked on normally a weekly basis. These kinds of advertisements are generally textual advertisements, and some cases may even carry smaller images. The LCC themselves double up as the advertisement agencies giving complete solution to the customers, right from production to equipment to distribution all in a package.

The Director of BTN Monish Das explains their programming thus “we have live talk shows on health, where doctors answer to the queries directly which the viewers ask by telephone, we have dance and song by kids, also we organize events by local artists, we go out on the streets and parks to record. We also have live shows like during *Durga Puja*, the *Dashami* festivities, Republic Day, some renowned artists programme are also telecasted live. Among the local viewers the popularity of BTN is huge, and that is the reason people are still not converting to Direct to Home (DTH), this local touch is absent in DTH.” And this local touch that he talks about is the growth centers of new culture. Peter Manuel’s work shows, cassette culture opened new markets, produced new artists and music forms, and hugely expanded the market. Both in production and circulation, cassette culture stood at the borderline of the property regime, a feature that clearly anticipated the form the ‘global’ decade of the 1990s would take (Sundaram, 2005: 56). LCC’s created new genres, and new stars, who the audience could relate to. These new breed of artists who became known through their neighbourhood performances opened up new markets and cultural forms.

The local thus emerged as the site of popular culture, encouraged by LCC’s. Localization has definitely helped hitherto marginalized groups to participate in the public sphere (Neyazi, 2010: 920). Local festivals such as *Durga Puja* are covered live on BTN and become important spaces for public gathering. The public is formed on television through BTN and the channel becomes an important conduit for people’s expression of festivity and joy throughout the area of coverage of the LCC.

VNS Network

The Editor of VnS cable (constituent channels of V&S network) which covers Dibrugarh in upper Assam Mr. Chandan Jyoti Kalita says “Dakhineswar in Kolkata the rituals that are done there, people of this region can’t afford to go there to watch them, so we for the first time started showing those rituals and recitations. They record CD’s there and send them to us and then we telecast.”

As the networks took shape and got larger in size so too the channels started to get more ambitious and even branch off into niche channels like cinema or language specific content. VnS News is one of the most popular among the channels. The distance between Guwahati and Dibrugarh both geographically and content wise gave ample space for other news channel to grow. Mr. Kalita points out “the logic behind the news channel was that they (satellite channels) are only Guwahati based. They only make news from there; they never show the problems of the people living here. What they do is they make it there and push it to us, the smaller towns”. The grudge with Guwahati based satellite news channels is clear; VnS is a means of resisting imported images from power centers. Appadurai and Breckenridge have argued that ‘most societies today possess the means for the local production of modernity’ (1995: 1).

The reach of V&S cable is massive, it has numerous LCO's under it and the four channels it produces are a driving force for its expansion. VnS News caters to news from the four districts, the size and influence of V&S Cable the MSO has been driven by its local content generation. As Sundaram (2005: 56) mentions "by the late 1990s, multi-service providers emerged, pushed by large television networks offering franchises to local players, but this only increased conflict at the local level between rival operators.

Legal Issues

The two LCC's that I studied resemble a unique form of 'small media', which although is owned by operators, is actually sustained by the interests of the consumers. This consumer-audience equation has led to programming which is interactive. The 'local' which has lost out in the mainstream media gains importance here, infact the local becomes the site for production of 'culture'. Be it school programmes, a local match, neighbourhood programmes, inaugurations, local festivals etc. are at the center of LCC's programming. It is ambiguities in the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act 1995 that allows the operations of these channels. Yet, they become important means of public information used by the administration from time to time, and can be found in most towns in Assam. The fact that they are not registered with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting but take local clearance from the Post Offices makes them fall outside of the purview of rules for satellite channels. The rules are quite vague and have been interpreted locally by administrators. Based on complaints the ministry has set up a committee to look into the issue of channels being run by LCO's and MSO's. Although out of purview of media laws the cable channels need to be sustained and streamlined due to the reasons stated below:

- The growth of local content through LCCs has facilitated an emergent layer of the press and media at the grass root level.
- The existence of LCCs is explained by the global/local dichotomy of the Guwahati media and LCO's
- LCCs act as local sites of resistance and space for production of local values and codes
- Becomes important to define these local spaces and frame legalities before large MSO's gobble them up.

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